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The Political Functions of Independent Commissions: Comparing UK Commissions on Migrant Integration and Cohesion¹

Abstract

UK governments have frequently set up commissions to produce reports on complex policy problems, especially following ‘crisis’ focusing events. Such commissions are ad hoc, limited in duration, and engage external actors in providing policy advice and expertise to governments. This problem-solving, or instrumental function, is prominent in the literature: commissions are valued as a means of producing useful knowledge to inform policy responses. However, we believe that the problem-solving rationale does not adequately explain the decision to set up a commission, given the additional resources required, and the risk that governments take in allowing quasi-independent bodies to produce recommendations. Instead, we argue that the value of commissions may lie as much in their symbolic functions as their problem-solving ones: they are valued for their capacity to signal that governments are taking appropriate action to address policy problems. This article will explore how important these different functions have been with regard to integration policies for migrants and ethnic minorities, comparing three commissions which reported since 2000: the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000), the Community Cohesion Review Team (2001), and the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007).

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1. Introduction

Governments frequently set up commissions to produce reports on complex policy problems, especially following “crisis” focusing events (Boin et al. 2008; McConnell 2003; Resodihardjo 2006). Literature on independent commissions has primarily focused on Anglophone countries (Chapman 1973, Cartwright 1975, Lipsky and Olson 1977, Iacobucci 1989), but attention has increasingly been paid to expert committees in a diverse set of polities (Bunwaree et al. 2005, Marier 2009, Schneider and Scholten forthcoming). Commissions typically take the form of ad hoc bodies, established for a limited time, with the task of providing policy advice to governments. Importantly, commissions engage a wider set of actors beyond those normally involved in policymaking (Cartwright 1975): members may include practitioners, researchers, and representatives of civil society groups. They are granted a more or less autonomous status, being mandated to engage in a process of information-gathering, analysis and debate with the aim of producing recommendations.

Clearly, then, the decision to establish a commission indicates both a willingness to commit additional resources to a problem, and a readiness to cede a certain degree of control over the outcome of the commission’s deliberations. This raises the obvious question of why governments would want to pursue this route. Framed in the context of this special issue, what are the political uses of commissions, including as part of a response to crisis? Recent contributions have focused on the contribution of commissions to policy learning: they are valued as a means of producing knowledge to inform policy responses (Rowe and McAllister 2006, Marier 2009). Indeed this problem-solving function tends to be the rationale explicitly given by governments to

justify setting up a commission (see, for example, Lord Rothschild 1978, in Bulmer 1981).

However, we believe that the problem-solving rationale does not adequately explain the decision to set up a commission, given the potential costs mentioned above. Instead, we argue that the value of commissions may lie as much in their symbolic functions: their capacity to signal that governments are taking appropriate action to address policy problems. We divide this symbolic function into two types: substantiating and legitimising. Commissions play a substantiating function where they provide evidence or support for the government's preferred course of action. And they play a legitimising role where they help signal that the government is taking appropriate action to address a problem.

This article will explore how important these different functions have been in the case of commissions on immigrant integration. The area of immigrant integration incorporates race relations, community cohesion and citizenship acquisition.

Commissions or inquiries in this area have a long history in the United Kingdom.² We focus on the more recent past, comparing three commissions³ which reported after 2000: the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain in 2000 (CMEB), chaired by Professor Bhikhu Parekh; the Community Cohesion Review Team (CCRT) in 2001, chaired by Ted Cantele; and the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in 2007 (CIC), chaired by Darra Singh.

² For example, the Scarman Inquiry, 1981; the Swann Report, 1985; and the Macpherson Inquiry, 1999.

³ Despite lacking the word 'commission' in its title, the CCRT functioned very much as a commission according to generic definitions. As Chapman (1973: 9) notes, "although particular institutions may be called, for example, Royal Commissions, Commissions, Committees, or Working Parties, there is in practice little difference between them."

We explore the different rationales that shaped the establishment and denouement of commissions. Were the commissions valued for their problem-solving, substantiating, or legitimising functions? We also examine a second question of how far these initial intentions were subsequently met. In many cases, the work of commissions may prove to be more or less useful to governments than expected. Governments and other actors may identify new and unanticipated uses for commissions as their deliberations unfold, or once recommendations have been made. Alternatively, commissions may become a liability over time as they produce embarrassing findings or receive negative media coverage. It may therefore be the case that the functions of commissions change *over time*, from their establishment through to the dissemination of their reports and their subsequent influence on debates. We will therefore enquire into the initial purpose of setting up the commission; and how, if at all, this purpose changed over time.

Our comparative analysis of the three commissions draws on a combination of content analysis (commission reports, press releases, media coverage, official responses) and 16 in-depth interviews with commission chairs, members, and those in government most closely involved with commissions (around 25% of participants). In the next section we develop some ideas about the different functions of commissions for governments, focusing in particular on the neglected question of their symbolic uses. Given the methodological challenges in distinguishing between these different functions, we also set out a number of indicators which can help identify instances in which commissions are being set up or supported to fulfil these respective functions. Section three presents findings from the analysis of the three commissions.

2. The Functions of Commissions

Most of the literature on commissions notes their problem-solving role, indeed this function is often incorporated into the very definition of commissions. As Martin Bulmer writes, for example, the term ‘commission’ refers to “special ad hoc bodies set up to advise on specific policy problems” (Bulmer 1981: 377). Similarly, Patrik Marier defines commissions as “any working group created and mandated by a government to study a particular policy and/or program” (Marier 2009: 1206). This encapsulates a technocratic view of commissions, according to which “government is in doubt as to how an issue should be resolved; if a convincingly argued solution is put forward, the government will adopt it as policy” (Bulmer 1983: 436).

This problem-solving understanding of commissions echoes mainstream accounts of how governments make use of expert knowledge in policy-making. Such analyses have emphasised the problem-solving function of research, which is valued by governments as a means of adjusting policy, in order to achieve specified policy goals (McNamara 1998, Walsh 2000). On these accounts, the main debate revolves around whether or not research is taken up and used in this instrumental way: the dependent variable is use of research to adjust policy.

A number of contributions on the sociology of knowledge utilisation, have questioned this rather linear problem-solving account. And these critiques, we argue, are just as valid for theories of the uses of commissions. Carole Weiss (1986) challenged the notion that research fed into policy in a direct, linear way, instead suggesting that it was far more likely to influence policy indirectly, by gradually chipping away at dominant ways

of constructing policy issues. She termed this form of influence the “enlightenment” function of knowledge. Meanwhile, a number of sociologists and public policy theorists have developed a more radical critique of instrumental accounts, suggesting that research may also be playing more symbolic functions. They have argued that expert knowledge can be valued not just as a means of adjusting policy, but also as a way of substantiating pre-given policy choices (Nordlinger 1981, Pfeffer 1981, Author ref); or in order to legitimise the credibility of policymakers (Sabatier 1978, Author ref).

We believe that these two symbolic functions of research are likely to apply *par excellence* to the functions of commissions. First, commissions can provide arguments or evidence that help substantiate already preferred courses of action. Governments can structure commissions in such a way that they deliver the ‘right’ types of messages, findings or recommendations, which in turn help validate controversial decisions (Rhodes 1975; Rowe and McAllister 2006: 99). This does not necessarily imply that governments always have precise and well developed ideas about which course of action they would like to follow. It may be that they favour a general approach or set of priorities that they trust the commission to elaborate in the right direction. But the point is that they are expecting the commission to broadly back up a preferred approach.

Second, we argue that setting up and supporting a commission can help signal that a government is taking action to address a problem, and that it is drawing on the best available expertise and evidence to do so. In this sense, commissions can play a legitimising role, signalling to observers that an issue is being taken seriously, even if in practice there is no adjustment of policy. Indeed, this idea of signalling that government

is taking action resonates with the idea of commissions as a “delaying tactic”, a tendency which has been identified in the literature on commissions but not fully explored (Cartwright 1975, McConnell 2003, Rowe and McAllister 2009: 102).

Under what conditions might we expect commissions to perform these different functions? First, the problem-solving function of commissions would be most likely to be relevant where the agency establishing the commission recognises it has gaps in its knowledge, and considers that a commission will be an appropriate means for delivering the required expertise or evidence. In other words, policymakers acknowledge there are limitations in their understanding of the problem and how to rectify it. By contrast, the legitimising function is more likely to be important in cases where governments are concerned about demonstrating their capacity to address problems. In such contexts, policymakers are likely to rely less on substantive adjustments to output, opting instead for more symbolic actions to secure support for their policy: rhetoric, or formal structures (Scott and Meyer 1991, Brunnsen 2002). Finally, the substantiating function is likely to prevail in situations where policy is highly contested. Policymakers are keen to draw on evidence to support their preferences. And invoking expert knowledge or arguments produced by a respected commission may be seen as a good means of substantiating their chosen course of action.

Indicators

While it is relatively straightforward to distinguish analytically between these different functions, it is more challenging to identify them in practice. Policymakers will tend to

fall back on instrumental narratives to explain the functions of commissions; indeed, as Nils Brunsson has argued, such narratives are often crucial for sustaining motivation and legitimacy within an organisation (Brunsson 2002: 7). So how can we design our data collection and analysis in a way that avoids simply reproducing the narratives of policymakers?

We would like to suggest a number of indicators that can help gauge the functions of commissions, in a way that provides a form of “check” or validation independent of the self-adopted narratives of policymakers. These indicators are all linked to features of commissions, and the interaction between commissions and policymakers. They are loosely based on [author’s] indicators for the different functions of research in policymaking (Author ref), but adjusted to capture the particular features of commissions.

Composition. A first indicator is the commission’s composition, which provides useful insights into how policymakers view its anticipated usefulness. Where the commission is valued for its instrumental function, we would expect the commission to be chaired by/composed of those experts deemed best qualified to fill gaps in knowledge. By contrast, if the commission is valued for its substantiating function, we would expect governments to ensure it is chaired by/composed of, people who are trusted to deliver recommendations in line with government preferences. Finally, if the commission is valued for its legitimising role, we would expect its chair and composition to be figures considered authoritative in their field, thereby lending weight to the commission.

Resources and timeframe. Second, where a commission is seen as performing an instrumental role, we would expect it to be allocated sufficient time and resources to produce valid findings. Where it is valued for its substantiating function, we might expect a greater interest in an expedited commission to produce findings in a timely way in order to support the government's preferred course of action. In the case of legitimising knowledge, there will be less interest in swift outcomes – indeed, it may be in the interest of the government to defer the commission's report as part of a delaying tactic. There may also be less interest in investing substantial resources, beyond the need to signal it is taking the question seriously.

Independence. A third indicator is the degree of independence accorded the commission in respect of its terms of reference, and its margin of manoeuvre in subsequent deliberations and the drafting of its report. Where the commission is valued for its instrumental function, we would expect it to be allowed to operate relatively independently of government, with the proviso that its work remains relevant to the problem at hand. In the case of the substantiating function, we would expect the commission to be more tightly controlled by government, both in its terms of reference and subsequent activities. In the case of the legitimising function, we would expect the commission to have a high degree of independence, both to signal its credibility as an independent body, and also because the government has less interest in the substantive findings of the report. However, such independence is not limitless: sponsoring departments will be wary of being inadvertently embarrassed by a commission's proposals.

Dissemination. The fourth indicator concerns the government's interest in publicising the establishment and workings of the commission, and its findings. Where the commission is valued for its instrumental function, policymakers will be less concerned about such publicity, as the main purpose of the commission is to produce findings to adjust policy. In the case of the substantiating function, we would expect policymakers to selectively publicise the findings of the commission, to support their arguments. Such publicity may involve a high profile launch of the report to ensure maximum impact of its findings. In the case of the legitimising function, we would expect policymakers to be less concerned about dissemination of the specific findings, and more interested in publicising the existence, composition, and workings of the commission as a means of signalling its credibility.

Government take-up. The final indicator concerns how far the government does in fact make use of the commission's findings to adjust policy. If the Commission is playing an problem-solving function, we would expect its findings to be used to adjust policy. If its function is primarily substantiating, its findings would be used to bolster already favoured courses of action. If it is valued as a means of bestowing legitimacy, there would be limited take-up of the Commission's findings. It should be noted that there may well be a discrepancy between the government's initial expectations about the usefulness of the commission's findings, and how useful they turn out to be in practice. We should also note that the influence of a commission may either be bolstered or discredited depending on how it is received in the mass media. For this reason, this fifth indicator is more a measure of how the government makes use of the commission's findings at the end of the process; it cannot tell us much about the government's initial intention in setting up the commission.

The five indicators are summarised in Table 1.

< Insert Table 1 about here. >

In what follows, we apply these indicators to explore the functions of commissions through a comparative analysis of three cases. All three commissions cover the area of immigrant integration and inter-ethnic relations, allowing us to (at least partially) control for differences in the functions of commissions across policy sectors. All three were set up in the 2000s, under the Labour administration led by Tony Blair – again, allowing us to compare commissions under similar conditions of government ideology and leadership style. However, beyond these similarities the three commissions display important variations across the dimensions set out in the indicators above: in terms of their composition, terms of reference, resources, timeframe, approach to dissemination, and how far the government made use of their findings. Importantly, the commissions also vary in the level of government involvement in their set-up and funding: the CCRT and CIC were government-sponsored commissions, whereas the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain was established by the Runnymede Trust – though with strong backing and various forms of involvement from senior Labour Party and government figures.

3. Three Commissions Compared

Commissions on integration in the UK have tended to be established in the aftermath of dramatic ‘focusing’ events. Two of the inquiries we study follow this pattern. The *Community Cohesion Review Team* (CCRT) was set up following public disturbances in

the summer of 2001 affecting several English towns: Bradford, Burnley and Oldham. The riots were some of the worst seen in the UK for at least 20 years, with around 400 arrests, over 400 police officers injured, and damages was estimated at £10 million (Home Office 2001).

The origins of the *Commission on Integration and Cohesion* (CIC) can be traced to the government's early response to the terrorist attacks in London on July 7, 2005. Tony Blair quickly announced the creation of a Muslim Taskforce to combat the spread of Islamic extremism. As one response to the Taskforce's deliberations, Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced a Commission on Integration and Cohesion. This was framed as an opportunity to hold a 'national conversation'⁴ about the broad role of faith – and not just Islam – in British society: the subsequent careers of Clarke and Blair indicate that they considered this to be a 'legacy' issue.⁵ However, a reorganisation of Whitehall in 2006 led to the commission being passed over to the newly-created Department for Communities and Local Government, headed by Ruth Kelly. The commission's remit shifted accordingly, to focus on issues of integration and cohesion in local areas where established ethnic minorities and/or new migrant communities resided.

By contrast, the *Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (CMEB), which convened between 1998 and 2000, was initially conceived by the Runnymede Trust think-tank as a sequel to the highly influential report *Colour and Citizenship* (Rose 1969), one of the founding documents of British race relations and a major inspiration for legislation of the time. Like the CIC, though, the CMEB was also delayed by a 'false

⁴ Interview with a senior civil servant.

⁵ Clarke is Visiting Professor in Religion and Faith at Lancaster University; Blair set up his Faith Foundation in 2008.

start'. Although originally the inspiration of Professor Bhikhu Parekh and Trevor Phillips, then chair of Runnymede, Parekh himself was not the trustees' first choice as chair of the commission. Instead, Sir John Burgh, a former senior civil servant, was brought in to chair the body. However, Burgh's chairmanship was undone by difficulties in finding suitable staff and a lack of cooperation between the Trust and commissioners, and he resigned. Parekh was brought in to replace him and re-constitute the membership.⁶

In what follows, we analyse features of the commissions in relation to the indicators set out above: composition, resources, dissemination, and government take-up.

Composition

Appointing a chair and members is an important lever which sponsors have to influence a commission. In the case of the CCRT, Ted Cante was selected as a "safe pair of hands", who could be trusted to deliver appropriate recommendations. Cante was known to a number of ministers through his senior management roles in local government. As one member of the former Labour government put it: "I knew Ted ... and had always been very impressed with him generally as an officer. (...) He would know that the ministers will want something they can do something with" (interview with minister). As Cante himself recounted:

[Ministers] knew me as a sort of 'safe officer' type person, who was capable of writing a report and presenting findings and so on.

⁶ Interview with commissioner.

Cantle considered that the most important attribute for CCRT members was to be “very clued up about policy and practice, and what levers needed to be pulled (...) [Our recommendations] were capable of being adopted, that was the point: we knew how to make them happen” (interview with Cantle). The membership was ethnically diverse, and also included people with various types of practical experience and expertise, including from the third sector, the police, trades unions, and local government. While none of the commissioners were academics, input from advisors with academic backgrounds was sought (Appendix C of the CCRT report). The choice of a trusted chairman, and the value attached to “making things happen”, point to a substantiating or problem-solving role for the CCRT. Members were not selected in order to signal the authority of the commission, but rather to produce politically astute recommendations which stood a high chance of being taken up in policymaking.

Deciding the CIC’s membership, in contrast, was a very drawn-out process and much less straightforward, due to the ministerial upheavals described above. It is therefore more difficult to identify a rationale behind the selection of the commission’s chair and its members. Like the CCRT, a local government chief executive, Darra Singh, was named as chair. Singh had served on the CCRT, so was already known to policymakers in this field. Two academics – both with connections to the Labour party – were also invited to participate.

The composition of the CMEB, by contrast, suggests that its sponsors and chair were keen to produce findings that would influence public debate and policy: commissioners were appointed for possessing relevant experience, be it academic- or practitioner-based. Parekh’s team included some of the leading academics in the field, people “who I

thought had kept away from public life, or who were active in public life but had never been involved in policymaking, and I wanted to draw them in. So I wanted the best brains in the field of race, to think” (interview with Parekh). But including leading academics can also be seen as a means of ensuring the commission was seen as authoritative, thereby bolstering the credibility and reputation of its sponsor, the Runnymede Trust. Indeed, it is difficult to disentangle these instrumental and legitimising functions, as a more authoritative report would presumably enhance its influence on policy.

Resources and Duration

An oft-remarked issue in the literature on commissions is the lack of time or resources available to complete the assigned task (Bulmer 1981). Commissioners on the CCRT had a very short timescale to report in: “[ministers] wanted something which would be practically focused and to which they would be able to respond fairly quickly (...) they wanted this doing in three months, which was pretty tricky” (interview with commissioner). This need for speed precluded the creation of a judicial inquiry. When asked about this option, a minister concerned explained: “There is no way in which you can afford to have an inquiry which some judge might independently decide should last for two years, because you needed to respond as quickly as was feasible” (interview with minister).

Commissioners on the CIC were more positive. “Level of resources was good, as far as I can see. We never felt short of money (...) I don’t remember at any point being told that we can’t do that because we can’t afford it.” (interview with commissioner). And there

was certainly no rush to produce findings: in contrast to the three months allotted to the CCRT, CIC commissioners had a full 12 months in which to complete their work, on top of the year-long ‘false start’ noted above. The logic of the delaying tactic was not lost on one of the commissioners: “one of the bog-standard explanations of why you have a commission is that it kicks things into the long grass long enough for it to be long enough down the line, precisely to avoid the immediate high-media scramble” (interview with commissioner).

The CMEB was initially financed from generous private sources,⁷ and was given ample time – over two years – to produce a report. However, the ‘false start’ under Sir John Burgh meant that there were no funds left to conduct any original research during Parekh’s chairmanship, the secretariat had to be reduced to one paid employee and one volunteer. The generous timeframe and initially generous funding might suggest a desire to produce findings that would be robust and comprehensive. However, the lack of urgency and failure to find top-up funding may also point to a legitimising function, with Runnymede and the commission’s Labour supporters supporting the idea of an authoritative ‘landmark’ commission but less concerned to invest the resources necessary to produce actionable findings.

In summary, the CMEB’s resources and duration again suggest that it may have had a dual role of both impacting policy, and legitimising its sponsors. In the case of Cantle’s report, by contrast, the CCRT appears to have been designed to produce a swift response to what was considered an urgent problem – whether in order to fill gaps in

⁷ Approximately £300,000 to £400,000 was raised through a matched-funding initiative of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation. (Interviews with commissioners).

knowledge, or to substantiate the government's policy preferences. The slow start which the CIC was allowed to make, on the other hand, and the ample resources it received thereafter, signal that the commission was set up as a 'delaying tactic' by ministers, a function we label as 'legitimising'.

Independence

In ascertaining the independence of each commission, it is useful to look at both their initial terms of reference, and the degree of involvement of government in their subsequent deliberations. The CMEB was tasked "to analyse the current state of multi-ethnic Britain and to propose ways of countering racial discrimination ... making Britain a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity" (CMEB 2000: viii). According to the chair: "The terms of reference were pretty wide ... bearing in mind multi-ethnic Britain, where should we be going? Almost anything and everything!" (interview with Parekh).

This is not to say that the CMEB's subsequent autonomy was entirely unconstrained. The commission had received the semi-official blessing of the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, and a first draft was sent to his office. From the perspective of one commissioner not privy to discussions with the Home Office, this could have been merely a matter of courtesy: "It's a reciprocal thing: [ministers] don't want to be ambushed by something which they didn't anticipate and to which they have to respond very quickly. And therefore they appreciate advance sight." For the chair, sharing drafts was also intended to ensure the commission did not misrepresent the government's thinking:

Sometimes a civil servant would write to us wanting to know what we were doing, what kinds of policy we were beginning to support. So there was some fusion of ideas: they talking to us and we to them. And then when the first draft was ready, very tentative, we sent it to the minister, to look at it, to see if there were any glaring deficiencies: if we had got something wrong in terms of the government's vision or policy. Just by way of correction, not by way of giving their imprimatur: not approval but just correction. (interview with Parekh)

In contrast to the broad remit of the CMEB, the CCRT had far narrower terms, even to the point of stipulating which actors should be addressed by commissioners: "to obtain the views of local communities, including young people, local authorities and faith organisations ... on the issues that need to be addressed in developing confident, active communities and social cohesion" (CCRT 2001: 5). In the words of one commissioner:

It was a top-down agenda to a great extent. (...) You know, it's almost like having a table of contents and then going down and saying 'how do we fill the table of contents?' (...) It was very specifically around community cohesion. They'd *already* decided that, you know, we'd already moved away from multiculturalism.

The question which remains, however, is whether the top-down steer was coming from the Home Office or from Cantle himself. On this point, the evidence is mixed. Cantle met with ministers several times to discuss working drafts, ostensibly because the government wished to coincide the release of the CCRT and local reviews with the publication of the government's own response to the various reviews, through the Inter-Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion. Nonetheless, Cantle was at pains to stress the lack of government interference:

I thought that at some point they were going to perhaps try and constrain what we said or inhibit some of the criticisms we were making of government policy. But I have to say, not at all: not one single attempt or suggestion that we might ameliorate our findings in any way. Which really did unnerve me a bit actually, it surprised me. (interview with Cantle)

A minister involved also echoed these sentiments:

It wasn't a nurse-maiding approach. There was certainly nothing about no-go areas, or nothing about 'you've got to do so-and-so.' I can imagine that does happen in other types of reviews, but in this one, I think we just struck lucky with Ted.

Turning finally to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, its members were asked "to consider how local areas can play a role in forging cohesive and resilient communities" (CIC 2007: 17). There was only one topic which informally was off-limits for the CIC, according to commissioners: no allusion was to be made linking the 7/7 bombings to the government's foreign policy. Other than that, commissioners felt they had freedom to explore the issues as they saw fit. This autonomy also extended to the drafting of the CIC report, *Our Shared Future*. Similar to Cantle's interactions with ministers for the CCRT, the chair Darra Singh met regularly with the minister, Ruth Kelly, and her special advisers. However, unlike the CCRT, commissioners perceived a 'light touch' approach from ministers, and were at pains to emphasise their independence: "I think there was a genuine sense in which the politicians wanted to not be involved, for it to be perceived to be independent in large degree. So to that extent, it had the necessary amount of support but Ruth Kelly wasn't all over us" (interview with commissioner).

In summary, the CIC had a large degree of independence from government, and what is more, ministers were keen for the commission to be so *perceived*, pointing to a legitimising rationale. Regarding the CCRT, the evidence is mixed on whether problem-solving or substantiating logics were at work: the allusion above to top-down interference echoes the suspicions found in existing commentaries (see Robinson 2008: 17-19). Yet interviews with ministers and Cantle himself point to a more nuanced interpretation. Having put considerable thought into the choice of chair, ministers felt

reassured that they had the right person for the job, implying there was no need to significantly interfere in its deliberations. The CMEB also presents some unexpected aspects. Despite being free of direct government control with regard to terms of reference, there was nonetheless a degree of Home Office oversight of its drafts. Commissioners explained this either as a courtesy to minimise the risk of inadvertently embarrassing the government, or to ensure that recommendations were relevant to policymakers. These explanations are consistent with the idea that the CMEB may have had both legitimising and instrumental functions.

Dissemination

The dissemination indicator refers to a sponsor's interest in publicising both the establishment of a commission, and the outcome of its deliberations. The two government-sponsored commissions were launched by high-profile politicians, in response to high-profile events. The CCRT was announced by the Home Secretary David Blunkett in the House of Commons on July 10, 2001, following a weekend of rioting in Bradford. Although a more drawn-out process, the creation of the CIC can be traced back to the government response to the 7/7 bombings. The CMEB, although formally independent of government, had close ties to the Labour party, and these connections were activated when the Home Secretary Jack Straw accepted an invitation to launch the commission in January 1998.

As regards dissemination of findings, the dissemination of the CCRT report was managed by Cantle in conjunction with the Home Office secretariat attached to the Review. It was carefully timed, with a simultaneous governmental response in the form

of the inter-ministerial working group report. In the event, Cantle's report attracted considerable coverage, almost certainly boosted by David Blunkett's decision to pre-empt an announcement of the findings. Cantle maintained that:

it didn't in any way interfere with what we said. (...) I think the problem was more that when people from the outside viewed the report they probably thought – wrongly – that somehow David Blunkett had had a hand in it and was pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Stage-management by New Labour policymakers was also a feature in the dissemination of the CIC report, *Our Shared Future*. In a departure from the other commissions considered here, the publication of interim findings some four months before the release of the final report indicates the importance that government attached to keeping the work of the commission in the public eye. As with the CCRT, a number of findings from the final report were leaked in advance by ministers, in this case through the launch of a pamphlet on 'Britishness' written by Kelly and Liam Byrne for the Fabian Society.⁸

Thereafter, ministerial special advisers took the lead in briefing the media about what the report contained. The press was directed to the particular line that CLG wanted to run: "It was simplified, structured, messaged, gobbitted, and handed to the journalists on a plate in a digestible form, and they ate it without exception" (interview with commissioner). Arguably, the actual content of the dissemination was less important than signalling to the public that a thorough and credible inquiry had taken place: this legitimising function is evident from the fact that few of the highlighted findings were subsequently translated into policy, as the next section will argue.

⁸ Kelly and Byrne (2007) *A Common Place*, London: The Fabian Society

Finally, in the case of the CMEB, pro-active engagement with the media is also a feature, but for different reasons again. Given that commissioners were aiming to impact not only policy but also public debate, they realised they needed to broadcast their message to the wider public. The appointment of a number of prominent journalists as commissioners signals that the chair and sponsor had one eye on dissemination from the outset, in order “to give us a certain kind of sensitivity to what the public will accept” (interview with Parekh). The commission also hired a PR company to manage the media strategy. Ultimately, these preparations backfired spectacularly (McLaughlin and Neal 2004), as we explore in the next section.

Government Take-up

As we argued earlier, the extent to which policymakers see a commission as contributing to policy can change over time, and in unanticipated ways. The CMEB is a case in point. At its launch in January 1998, Home Secretary Jack Straw forcefully invoked the commission’s problem-solving potential, declaring that it was “setting off with a very strong wind. We are going to take it very seriously.”⁹ Of course, government-sponsored or -endorsed commissions tend to be launched with such instrumentalist platitudes. However, ministers’ attitudes changed once the scale of the hostile media reception became apparent. The coverage focused on one short passage in the 417-page text: “Britishness ... has systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations” (CMEB 2000: 38). Mis-construing the word ‘racial’ for ‘racist’, the *Daily Telegraph* led with a front-page story which portrayed the CMEB report as a racist slur against the British people. This criticism was subsequently reproduced in newspapers across the ideological

⁹ The Guardian, February 4 1998, p2.

spectrum. As a result, the speech which Jack Straw's aides had prepared in advance of his launch of the report had to be re-written at the last minute. The official line, as encapsulated in the revised Home Office press release, was that the commissioners were not patriotic enough in their assessment of multi-ethnic Britain. The report swiftly became a "politically untouchable document" (McLaughlin and Neal 2004: 156), and as a result government ministers initially refused to endorse any of its recommendations.

Despite this inauspicious debut, the Parekh Report has proved surprisingly durable and influential, leading to adjustments in policy as well as discursive shifts in the terms used to debate ethnic diversity in the UK. This influence is attributed, ironically enough, to the media furore it created initially: "The [Telegraph coverage] has a counter-intuitively productive effect, because rather than everyone saying 'so what?' and it just lying dead, people actually begin to read it and debate about it" (interview with commissioner). It has since been claimed by the Runnymede Trust that more than half of the CMEB's recommendations have been acted upon, including the creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, merging the Commission for Racial Equality and other equality watchdogs; the introduction of citizenship ceremonies; better collection of ethnicity statistics in schools; and legislation prohibiting discrimination on religious grounds. Of equal significance are the reorientations in terminology and discourse about ethnic diversity which the report heralded:

So many things which are now seen as platitudes were introduced by us, when we said 'let us tell the (national) story differently.' Or putting the whole idea of being British, or 'Britishness', on the agenda. Everybody now talks about it – no one did before the report. (interview with commissioner)

The Cantle report likewise introduced a new set of terms to the integration and diversity debate, focused on the concept of community cohesion. In contrast to the

CMEB however, ministers' views of the CCRT were very positive, with John Denham stating in the government's immediate official response: "The Community Cohesion Review Team have been enormously helpful in shaping our proposals for action by Government. The team has identified many important issues, and their report contains a wealth of valuable description and analysis" (Home Office 2001: 1). Recommendations which government took up included citizenship ceremonies¹⁰ and more resources going to cross-cultural initiatives in schools. A recommendation to set a minimum 25 percent quota for non-denominational pupils in faith schools was eventually watered down to instituting a statutory duty on schools to promote community cohesion. More broadly, 'community cohesion' became a central aim of overall government policy, with considerable resources directed at it. As the chair recollected:

There was a willingness to carry through the report. [The Home Office] set up a Community Cohesion Unit, which was a civil servants' team to support us. And we then created quite an enormous web of people ... who could help us translate the findings into what was happening in schools or housing or wherever (interview with Cantle).

The Cantle report is widely viewed as 'paradigm-shifting', signalling an end to multiculturalist discourses about valuing difference and moving to the community cohesion approach which promotes 'shared' values. "[The CCRT] was one of the significant factors in the reappraisal of multiculturalism as it had previously been. (...) It's one of those landmark reports that began a change in thinking about how you do this" (interview with minister). As we saw, though, the concept of social cohesion was built into the commission's terms of reference: what the report did was to put flesh on the bones of an idea already being embraced by senior officials and Labour politicians.

¹⁰ Interestingly, this recommendation was first introduced in the Parekh report, but only gained acceptance from government when proposed by the CCRT.

By contrast, the CIC report disappeared from the agenda rather quickly, following the brief flurry of stage-managed media interest. Four months had elapsed before the CLG minister responded to *Our Shared Future*, in a letter to the Chair Darra Singh. The only substantive message contained therein was the announcement that funding for local authorities' cohesion-building activities would be significantly increased, from £2 million to £50 million, although with few indications about how that money would be spent. A further four months passed before the government's formal response emerged (CLG 2008). Although a substantial document of 50 pages, much of its content focused on policies that other ministries had developed to promote community cohesion. Guidance for Local Authorities was also promised. Regarding the headline recommendations of the report, however, little of consequence was delivered. The CIC's flagship proposal for an Integration Agency funded by central government was dropped following a feasibility study in June 2008. One commissioner summed up the CLG stance as being initially "eulogistic" about the report, but then not doing very much to follow it up.

4. Conclusions

Independent commissions can serve a range of purposes for governments. While most literature focuses on their problem-solving function, we have argued that such bodies are also likely to play important symbolic functions, helping substantiate particular policy preferences, or legitimising a sponsoring agency by signalling its willingness or capacity to address a problem. The three commissions examined in this paper display elements of each of these three functions.

The CCRT appears to have been set up primarily to flesh out government ideas about supporting “community cohesion”. The choice of a “safe officer” as chair, the closely proscribed terms of reference and swift reporting, and the close interaction with ministers and officials throughout, strongly suggest it had a substantiating function, designed to bolster support for the new paradigm. However, it clearly went further than simply backing up pre-given ideas. In elaborating the concept of community cohesion, the commission set out a number of detailed recommendations which went beyond government thinking, which had a significant impact on policy. In this sense, the CCRT appears to have combined features of substantiating and problem-solving functions.

The CIC, by contrast, appears to conform fairly closely to the “legitimising” type identified in the paper. Its protracted launch and deliberations, its wide and shifting remit, and the lack of attention to its findings, suggest that its substantive recommendations were not of particular interest to policymakers. At the same time, the resources invested in publicising its launch and findings imply the government was keen to signal to the media and public that it was taking action to address the big questions around faith and community cohesion which the London bombings had highlighted. Ultimately, the government never had a very clear idea of what exactly it wanted from the commission by way of findings, reflected also in the subsequent lack of take-up of the commission’s recommendations.

Turning to the CMEB, the composition, resources and degree of independence of the commission all suggest that its role was partly instrumental, partly legitimising. Its sponsors certainly intended it to influence policy. But both Runnymede and the commission’s Labour advocates also appear to have been interested in highlighting

their involvement with an eminent and potentially landmark report on multicultural Britain. The CMEB offers a fascinating example of how such intentions can become derailed: highly critical media attention forced the government to distance itself from the commission, at least initially. Nonetheless, the CMEB arguably had a profound affect on public debate and policy in the medium to long-term, thus representing a case of Weiss' "enlightenment" function of knowledge, which we classify as a form of instrumental knowledge utilization.

Beyond these specific findings, the analysis also shows how the function of commissions can change over time, in ways that are not always anticipated (Resodihardjo 2006). This was most clearly the case with the CMEB, with its rapid fall from grace following negative media reporting. But arguably it is also true in the case of the CCRT, whose impact on policy appears to have gone beyond what was expected – thus implying that an initially substantiating function evolved into a problem-solving one. Finally, our cases support the insight that policy change is unlikely to be based on bold new ideas developed outside government. It is far more likely to involve incremental adjustments, which broadly cohere with the beliefs and goals already espoused by policymakers. In this sense, commissions may have most impact on policy precisely when they are performing a combination of substantiating and instrumental functions: as in the case of the CCRT, such bodies have understood and embraced the priorities and objectives of policymakers, and see their job as further developing policy along those lines.

Alternatively, as in the case of the CMEB, they may propose more radical ideas which are not necessarily in line with existing government preferences; but in that case, it is likely to take longer for their ideas to seep through and influence policymaking.

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Table 1. Indicators of the functions of independent commissions

	<i>Instrumental</i>	<i>Substantiating</i>	<i>Legitimising</i>
<i>Composition</i>	Relevant expertise (academic or practitioner)	Trusted by government	Recognised as authoritative
<i>Resources/ timeframe</i>	Adequate to ensure valid findings	Adequate to produce desired results	Adequate to signal thorough review
<i>Independence</i>	Moderate, to allow valid findings but ensure relevance	Low, to ensure desired results	Moderate to High, to signal credibility of commission
<i>Dissemination</i>	Less important	Very important, targeted to persuade audience	Very important, targeted to signal authority
<i>Government take-up</i>	Findings used to adjust policy, if deemed useful	Findings used to back preferred action	Findings not directly used (may lead to longer-term 'enlightenment')